

Introduction to the Book of James

by John MacArthur

Author and Date

Of the 4 men named James in the NT, only two are candidates for authorship of this epistle. No one has seriously considered James the Less, the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3; Acts 1:13), or James the father of Judas, not Iscariot (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). Some have suggested James the son of Zebedee and brother of John (Matt. 4:21), but he was martyred too early to have written it (Acts 12:2). That leaves only James, the oldest half-brother of Christ (Mark 6:3) and brother of Jude (Matt. 13:55), who also wrote the epistle that bears his name (Jude 1). James had at first rejected Jesus as Messiah (John 7:5), but later believed (1 Cor. 15:7). He became the key leader in the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:12), being called one of the “pillars” of that church, along with Peter and John (Gal. 2:9). Also known as James the Just because of his devotion to righteousness, he was martyred ca. A.D. 62, according to the first century Jewish historian Josephus. Comparing James’ vocabulary in the letter he wrote which is recorded in Acts 15 with that in the epistle of James further corroborates his authorship.

James wrote with the authority of one who had personally seen the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:7), who was recognized as an associate of the apostles (Gal. 1:19), and who was the leader of the Jerusalem church.

James most likely wrote this epistle to believers scattered (1:1) as a result of the unrest recorded in Acts 12 (ca. A.D. 44). There is no mention of the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15 (ca. A.D. 49), which would be expected if that Council had already taken place. Therefore, James can be reliably dated ca. A.D. 44–49, making it the earliest written book of the NT canon.

Background and Setting

The recipients of this book were Jewish believers who had been dispersed (1:1), possibly as a result of Stephen’s martyrdom (Acts 7, A.D. 31–34), but more likely due to the persecution under Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12, ca. A.D. 44). The author refers to his audience as “brethren”

15 times (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19), which was a common epithet among the first century Jews. Not surprisingly, then, James is Jewish in its content. For example, the Greek word translated “assembly” (2:2) is the word for “synagogue.” Further, James contains more than 40 allusions to the OT (and more than 20 to the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5–7).

Historical and Theological Themes

James, with its devotion to direct, pungent statements on wise living, is reminiscent of the book of Proverbs. It has a practical emphasis, stressing not theoretical knowledge, but godly behavior. James wrote with a passionate desire for his readers to be uncompromisingly obedient to the Word of God. He used at least 30 references to nature (e.g., “wave of the sea” [1:6]; “reptile” [3:7]; and “heaven gave rain” [5:18]), as befits one who spent a great deal of time outdoors. He complements Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith with his own emphasis on spiritual fruitfulness demonstrating true faith.

Theme from ESV (not MacArthur)

James’s primary theme is living out one’s faith, being a doer and not just a hearer of the word. This theme is developed in view of the social conflict between rich and poor and the spiritual conflict between factions in the church. James rebukes his readers for their worldliness and challenges them to seek divine wisdom in working out these problems and getting right with God.

Interpretive Challenges

At least two significant texts challenge the interpreter: 1) In 2:14–26, what is the relationship between faith and works? Does James’ emphasis on works contradict Paul’s focus on faith? 2) In 5:13–18, do the promises of healing refer to the spiritual or physical realm?

Outline

There are a number of ways to outline the book to grasp the arrangement of its content. One way is to arrange it around a series of tests by which the genuineness of a person’s faith may be measured.

Introduction (1:1)

The Test of Perseverance in Suffering (1:2–12)

The Test of Blame in Temptation (1:13–18)

The Test of Response to the Word (1:19–27)

The Test of Impartial Love (2:1–13)

The Test of Righteous Works (2:14–26)

The Test of the Tongue (3:1–12)

The Test of Humble Wisdom (3:13–18)

The Test of Worldly Indulgence (4:1–12)

The Test of Dependence (4:13–17)

The Test of Patient Endurance (5:1–11)

The Test of Truthfulness (5:12)

The Test of Prayerfulness (5:13–18)

The Test of True Faith (5:19, 20)

ESV Outline (not MacArthur)

I. Greeting (1:1)

II. The Testing of Faith (1:2–18)

A. Joy in trials (1:2–4)

B. Wisdom from God for trials (1:5–8)

C. The place of rich and poor before God (1:9–11)

D. Reward for those who endure (1:12)

E. The process of temptation (1:13–18)

III. Hearing and Doing the Word (1:19–27)

A. Hearers of the word (1:19–21)

B. Doers of the word (1:22–25)

C. True, practical religion (1:26–27)

IV. The Sin of Partiality (2:1–13)

A. Preferring the wealthy over the poor in the assembly (2:1–7)

B. The royal law of love (2:8–11)

C. Acting in light of judgment (2:12–13)

V. Faith without Works Is Dead (2:14–26)

A. Faith without works (2:14–17)

B. Response of a critic (2:18–20)

C. Examples of Abraham and Rahab (2:21–26)

VI. The Sin of Dissension in the Community (3:1–4:12)

A. Taming the tongue (3:1–12)

B. The solution: wisdom from above (3:13–18)

C. Warning against worldliness (4:1–12)

VII. The Sins of the Wealthy (4:13–5:12)

A. Boasting about tomorrow (4:13–17)

B. Warning to the rich (5:1–6)

C. Patience in suffering (5:7–12)

VIII. The Prayer of Faith (5:13–18)

IX. Concluding Admonition (5:19–20)

This is an introduction to the Book of James and these outlines may not necessarily be followed by the Bible Study Leader each of the next five Sundays.

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Read James Chapter 1 for Sunday Bible Study 10/31/2021.

Notes and/or questions: